

# Investigating Adolescence and Social Change in Egypt



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*Doug Alexander*

[Photo: Moatsem Hatem and friends from the Gizera Experimental School in Cairo.]

When afternoon school bells ring, Cairo's congested back-streets become a forum where uniformed students share notes, dreams, and a few laughs.

Idle chatter between parked cars and street vendors has primed Egyptian teens to believe the 'world is their oyster'. Yet, they're also aware of the challenges ahead.

"I'd like to work as an engineer and I'd like to have a company, but it's hard to do this," says Moatsem Hatem. "To find a job after college is very difficult, especially in the Faculty of Engineering."

This 14-year-old, like his friends, is looking beyond Egypt for a future. "I really want to, when I grow up, travel to England I'd hope to find a better job there," he says.

## **13 million adolescents**

There's a reason why Moatsem and his peers see limited opportunities in their country. Egypt is home to 13 million adolescents (aged 10 to 19), who represent one-fifth of the total population. "There is a growing recognition that youth are a neglected population group, they require services, and they require resources," says [Barbara Ibrahim](#), Regional Director of the Population Council.

A global focus on youth — sparked by the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo — encouraged government and civil agencies to tackle youth issues. But many efforts were misguided: work was pursued without enough information on hand about the needs of Egypt's adolescents.

## **Costly consequences**

A failure to address adolescent needs today can cause problems tomorrow. If youth are not adequately prepared or physically able to undertake productive and reproductive responsibilities as adults, the consequences will be costly for the state and society.

This reality, combined with a lack of knowledge about Egypt's largest age group, has prompted some institutions to act. In 1996, the [Population Council](#) — in partnership with the Social Research Centre at the American University in Cairo, the High Institute of Public Affairs at Alexandria University, and the Faculty of Medicine at Egypt's Assiut University — launched a project to study the situation of adolescents in the areas of education, health and reproduction, transition to work and marriage, and employment.

## **Sponsors**

The four-year project was funded by the Canadian International Development Agency, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Netherland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Rockefeller Foundation, the United Nation Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). IDRC supported an analysis of government policies on adolescents and health, education, and employment, which led to the report *Adolescence and State Policy*.

The project's backbone was a national survey of 9,128 adolescents and parents, supplemented by specialized studies on education, health and nutrition, transitions to work, and preparations for marriage. In-depth data collection tracked the daily activities of adolescents, and measured their health and nutrition through blood, urine, and stool samples. "It's the most comprehensive data collection done on young people that we know of in any developing country," says Ibrahim.

## **Surprising results**

The survey revealed some surprises. "We're struck that despite the number of problems that young Egyptians face today — finding jobs, having financial resources to support getting married, overcrowding in schools, and a lack of employment opportunities especially for young women — there's a resiliency, a positive attitude young people have about life," explains Ibrahim. "Given the obstacles [they face], young people in Egypt are surprisingly optimistic about their future."

While the team anticipated the problems experienced by girls, they were surprised by the obstacles boys faced including unexpectedly high rates of undernourishment, stunted growth, exposure to violence, and excessive workforce participation. Schooling had a positive effect on girls' support for shared gender roles, but was less likely to influence boys' attitudes. Such findings prompted the team to pilot intervention programs for boys.

## **Lacking information**

The survey also found that adolescents do not have enough information about their bodies, maturation, and other aspects of reproductive health to prepare them for family life.

"Young people need and want more information about reproductive health issues," stresses Ibrahim. "They're not getting even basic information from schools, and while they want it from their families, parents don't feel comfortable about giving them this information — it's taboo."

## **Major investments needed**

The survey concluded that major investments are needed in health, education, and job preparation to improve adolescents' well-being. In response, the research team recommends augmenting the school curriculum to create links to the job market; investing in more sports facilities for girls, whom the survey shows don't get enough exercise; initiating media awareness campaigns to fight anaemia and parasitic infections, which are chronic problems in adolescents; and creating better public programs to give adolescents much-needed reproductive health education.

The survey results will now allow researchers to examine the links between various aspects of the adolescent experience, analyse how boys and girls experience adolescence differently, and identify the differences between rural and urban Egypt. The work also provides a benchmark to compare future progress on adolescent issues.

## **National policy**

Already, this along with other projects has prompted action within the Egyptian government. After holding an expert workshop with various agencies in attendance, the government drafted a national policy on the healthy development of youth — a first for Egypt. "This initiative is the first policy that would link ministries and agencies together to work on youth in a cross-cutting policy," Ibrahim explains.

"Youth are now mentioned by the president in every major speech," adds Ibrahim. "The Prime Minister has established a new cabinet with a revitalized Ministry of Youth and Sport, and both donors and NGOs are forming programs to focus on youth. Adolescents are now getting the attention they deserve, even from Egypt's highest leaders."

*Doug Alexander is a Canadian journalist working in the Middle East with Gemini News Service under an internship award granted by the IDRC. (Photo: D. Alexander)*

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*If you have any comments about this article, please contact [info@idrc.ca](mailto:info@idrc.ca).*

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Sidebar: [Key Findings from the Adolescence and Social Change Survey in Egypt](#)

[Educational Reform in Latin America: Facing a Crisis](#), by Michael Smith

[Learning to Stay in School](#), by Estrella Maniquis

[Communicating with Adolescents about AIDS: Experience from Eastern and Southern Africa](#)

[30 Years of Learning: Educational Development in Eastern and Southern Africa from Independence to 1990](#)